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SUBJECT: POSTCARDS FROM ALBANIA: ALBANIA'S 21ST CENTURY GOLD RUSH

¶1. (U) This cable is part of an occasional series entitled "Postcards from Albania." These cables are prepared by our locally engaged staff to provide analysis, opinions and commentary on Albanian reality from an Albanian perspective. This cable was contributed by a member of the Pol-Econ staff.

¶2. (U) Gambling clubs and betting shops have mushroomed across today's Tirana, from the luxury neighborhoods of downtown Tirana like the Block Area to communist-style blocks of flats. Many would argue the establishments do not represent something to be proud of, although some sport a very modern style, using sumptuous materials and high-tech equipment. Often they are intermingled with bars and coffee shops, as if needing each other's reinforcement in a society that appreciates taking it easy and parading its riches. The gambling mania is evidence of a disease afflicting most Albanians: the dream to become rich overnight, possibly without a drop of sweat.

¶3. (U) This feeling likely has deep roots in Albania's history. It may be based on the life style adopted during Ottoman rule and reflected in traditions that have survived since then. Women continue to be blatantly overburdened with work both within the house and outside of it. Idleness and taking it easy were reinforced under the communist regime, when compulsory equality among people and the crusade against private initiative led to a general disinterest in work. It also was one the main reasons leading to the system's collapse. Furthermore, the illusion of becoming easily rich seen on foreign TV channels did not help to restore a basic free market economy principle -- the benefit of hard work.

¶4. (U) Despite an admirable entrepreneurial spirit exhibited by some Albanians, still over the last 15 years some events have confirmed the existence of a widespread get-rich-quick dream. The massive participation in the financial pyramid schemes of the late 1990s was the most tragic evidence. Involvement in illegal activities, such as trafficking of persons and weapons, is another. There are many other daily examples from Albanian society that can be named with just one word -- corruption, which goes hand in hand with easy money.

¶5. (U) COMMENT: It is obvious that for Albanians, the adoption of market rules remains a real challenge. The endeavor should encompass fighting poverty, informality in the economic sector, and poor governance. Equally, a better education system and greater opportunities for the young generation are key to dealing effectively with the root cause of corruption and other greedy behavior. Albanians have understood that when it comes to these issues there is no shortcut.

WITHERS